DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 186 111 PS 011 379

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TITLE From Visuals to Words.
PUB DATE Apr 80
NOTE 19p.: Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Midwest Association for the Education of Young Children (Milwaukee, WI, April 19, 1980).

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Elementary School Students; *Kindergarten Children; *Learning Activities; *Motivation Techniques; Primary Education; Teaching Methods; *Visual Aids; *Writing Exercises; Writing Instruction

ABSTRACT

This speech indicates how teachers can use visual materials in classrooms to promote writing by children in primary school. Five classroom tested motivating experiences discussed are: (1) adding words to wordless picture books, (2) writing about artist's paintings, (3) writing story lines from films, (4) comparing variant editions of the same story, and (5) making statements of preference. (Author/RH)

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FROM VISUALS TO WORDS*

by

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Teachers interested in motivating children to compose are surrounded by suggestions about how to do this. Books and periodicals contain many ways to encourage children to express ideas, either by dictating orally or by encoding words themselves.[1]

Visuals are one kind of input to writing. The word input consciously suggests that a major responsiblity of teachers is to motivate writing. Ideally, children would come to our classrooms eager to express their thoughts, either orally or in writing. Those of us who work with children know that often, for whatever the reasons, some students are hesitant to encode thoughts in words, Therefore, a main responsibility of teachers is to provide an impetus to writing, by providing input.

A well-balanced composition program entails many kinds of input.[2] This paper focuses only on some types of visual input, and resulting compos tion experiences which are possible as we work with children from kindergarten through grade three. The five types of experiences include:

1. adding words to wordless picture books,
2. writing about artist's paintings,
3. writing story lines from films,
4. comparing variant editions of the same story, and
5. making statements of preference.

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* A speech given at the Midwest Association for the Education of Young Children, Annual Conference, Milwaukee, April 19, 1980.

1. See for example, Children and Language, by Dorris M. Lee, and Joseph B. Rubin. (Belmont, CA : Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1979). The periodical, Language Arts contains many useful articles. See for example, the October, 1979 issue on composition.

2. Stewig, John Warren, Read to Write, New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1980.

WORDLESS PICTURE BOOKS

Many experts have commented about the validity of having children dictate or write a story line as shown in the sequential pictures in wordless books.[1] The built-in story structure provided by the artist is a help, especially to young writers who are just beginning to develop some intuitive grasp about how stories are made. Providing the structure of pictures allows ample opportunity for creativity, yet gives young writers an organizational framework within which to write.

We recently used a new book Time to Get Out of the Bath, Shirley, illustrated by a favorite children's artist, John Burningham.[2] The book, not technically a wordless one, features a minimal story line on left-hand pages, while on the right hand pages Shirley embarks on a fantasy journey to other lands.

We read the book to children, commenting on the minimal word story, and pointing out that the artist had told another story in pictures. Then children translated the pictures into their own words.

In a four-year old kindergarten class, children dictated a group story about Shirley's adventures:

Shirley is sliding down a pipe. Here's a book or something. There's a bottle. I see the tire.

Shirley is sliding into a cave. Here's a cow. There's a tree. No, there's five trees. Maybe it's a tunnel or something.

Shirley is swinging on the trees. There's a duck on the waterfall. The guards are coming on the horses. They look black. I see a white horse, too.

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1. Herman, Gertrude B. "Books Without Words: Picture Stories Bring Thought, Imagination, Delight," Wisconsin Library Bulletin, July, 1976, pp. 151-152.

2. Burningham, John, Time to Get Out of the Bath, Shirley. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1978.

Shirley's getting a ride with her father on a horse. There are trees. There's a witch peeking behind the tree. There's a moon because it's at night time. The owl is right on the tree.

The guards are still riding on their horses. They're holding up a checkered flag.

I see a river. I see a king. I see some flowers. The king and the queen are going with Shirley.

The king and the queen are blowing up some balloon gooses. The king has a mustache. I see some boots on the king.

The king's riding on a balloon duck. The flowers are under the water. There's two other more ducks. I see a little beak on the goose. There's a mitten on his pole. The queen and the king have hats on.

Shirley is pushing off the queen. I see lily pads under the water. The hat is blue and white. The frog is hopping or swimming. I see rocks.

Shirley's pushing the king off his goose. The king's splashing in the water. There is a flower. I see some shoes on the king's feet.

She comes back up in her home.

In one second grade class, the teacher shared the story, and then encouraged those children who were interested to dictate an oral account of the book. Lindsay dictated the following:

Shirley went down the pipe and she's going into the bricks. The wood is holding the tub up. The soap seems like it is slippery. There's a box under this part, right here.

She came out into the swamp through the pipe. There's a horse under the tree. She came out of the brick wall into a greenish kind of river.

It's in the afternoon. Shirely jumped off the duck and hung on to the tree, or else she would have gone down the waterfall. The duck went down the waterfall. People are riding on horses. There's a king on one of the horses. One of them is holding a flag.

There's three witches, and Shirley is riding on the horse with the man. And it's night and the moon is out. There aren't many leaves on the trees. There's an owl on the tree.

Now it's morning. The trees are full of leaves. There are two flags. One man is holding 'em. There's a princess with the prince. They're having a race.

They're going to jump. They're on the castle. Shirley's duck is down in the river. There are two cows near the duck. The clouds are out. They're green. The sun is out.

The people are blowing up balloons. And the balloons are ducks. The princess and the king are blowing them up.

The king is on the duck with the punching glove on a stick. His shoes are in the water. There's a person over on the castle stairs catching fish. There are lily pads. The princess is about to punch Shirley.

Shirley punched the princess off her duck into the river. The frogs are swimming, trying to get away from the princess and Shirley.

Shirley punched the king off the duck headfirst. And Shirley is still on her duck.

Shirley was dreaming.

A more sophisticated visual and language challenge is presented by using single pictures about which children can compose. Instead of a sequence framework, the child is confronted with a single visual, and must extend the action backwards or forwards in time, inventing plot and detail to make a complete unit which is only suggested by the illustration.

COMPOSING FROM PAINTINGS

To stimulate writing, provide reproductions of artist's paintings about which children can write. Large-sized reproductions of such paintings are available at reasonable cost.[1] It is a simple matter to share a reproduction with children. We encourage students to tell what they see, and to respond positively or negatively to the painting. As a follow-up to this group oral language experience, children choose a painting they like, and make up a story about it. We recently tried this approach in two second grade classrooms.

In one classroom, the teacher introduced a large reproduction of "Girl With a Watering Can" by Renoir, and encouraged children to respond orally. After initial discussion, the second graders dictated this group story:

> Once there was a little girl. Her name was Carol. She had blond hair. She was impossible! She sticks out her tongue at her mom! She's always running away from home! She hits her dad! She hates her mom!

1. This print and other reproductions are available at moderate cost from several distributors. A line of inexpensive prints is available from Giant Photos, Inc., Box 406, Rockford IL., 61105. Another source is Library Services, Inc., 42 Dartmouth St., Malden, MA. 02148.

One day she bought a red ribbon and she tried to strangle somebody. And somebody tried to strangle her back.

That didn't kill her so she bought a present for her grandmother. It was a pop-up snake in a box, and it scared her grandmother out of her wits. Then the little girl went home and cried. Then she got punished.

That's why she's impossible.

After the group dictation experience, children chose one from among fourteen other paintings which were available, and brought the reproduction to an aide, who took down the story they dictated.

The other second grade class dictated a descriptive piece about "The Blue Horses," by the German Expressionist painter, Franz Marc. Born in 1880, Marc studied human and animal anatomy in Paris, and is best known for animal studies like this one. After viewing this painting, the children dictated the following:

We see blue horses. The sky is red. The grass is green. The horses are eating on a white tusk. The sky looks like blood. The sky is also blue--light blue. The orange sun is on the ground. The sun is boiling into the earth. The horses are very round. Their heads are ovals. The tusk looks like a wishbone or a giant spare rib. The grass is like straight lines. The hills look like the round part of our planet earth.

After this group dictation, Michelle wrote her own story:

These horses are blue. They are wild. The horses are scratching their faces on some wood. There are some great big leaves of grass. There are pretty colors in here. People are going to catch the horses and break them. Then they are going to put some saddles on them and reins. Then they're going to ride them; then they're going to be good riding horses. They are going to sell them and they are going to be happy to get a new master. They are going to be used to round up cattle and they could be show horses. There might be a person that would ask the owners if they would sell their horse to them. Probably they'll say no.

"The Campers," was painted by the Frenchman, Ferdinand Leger, an associate of Picasso. This painting is characterized by Leger's usual hard, machine-like precision. Born in 1881, this artist espoused synthetic cubism, in which brilliant color was used boldly to create richly varied surfaces. About this painting, one child dictated:

This man right here is holding a piece of wood with his hand. He has black hair and brown skin and black pants. He is holding a hose. He has two moms and two brothers. It seems like they're by a park. His brother is holding a beach ball. This mom is holding a plant. The one mom is holding a brother's hand. It seems like there is a cactus on the sand. The ladies seem like they have a swimming suit on. It looks like one of the brothers is going in the water. The one with the beach ball will stay on the sand. They'll play catch with the beach ball. One of the brothers will go up the diving board. The tree branch is over the the lady. There is a plant in the water. There is a jack-in-the-box beside the boy.

There is a fence near the tree and the diving board. The diving board has spots on it. The diving board has steps to climb up on it. The leaves are hanging down from the tree. The man has one foot on the pier and he may go out on it. He might say, "I'm going on the pier to see if I can catch any fish." When he's all done, they might go home.

by Steve

A painting entitled "Bacchanal," is typical of Picasso's work. His paintings, done in Paris, showed startling shifts from one sort of visualization to another. The constant experimentation is typical both of this Spanish native, and of his followers. About "Bacchanal," one second grade child dictated:

Once upon a time there was a world that has blue skies, and brown and white people that have trumpets in the dark. Blue fireworks are smashing. The ground is brown. There is a little black in the sky. The brown and white people are sitting by the railroad track. A black tree is way down by their house. After they play their trumpet, they will go to bed.

Another Picasso painting, "Two Acrobats with a Dog," illustrates well the amazing diversity which characterizes his work. In choosing to compose about this painting, Brenda dictated the following:

There is a girl and a boy and a dog and they are gymnastic people. They are going to gym. Their house is in back of them; there are trees by it. The boy's name is Larry and the girl's name is Brenda. The doggy's name is Dusty and he is a cocker spaniel. It is winter out and she has bare feet. Brenda has a blue leotard and blue tights and Larry's got all different color tights and all different color sleeves and a blue leotard. He has a sack over his back and she is petting the doggy. In the bag there are hers and his tap-dancing shoes. dog biscuits, milk in case they get thirsty, and a blanket. He has a key in his hand to open up the gymnastic place. Doggy's wagging his tail. The girl has brown hair and the boy has blackish-brownish hair. The house is white with black shutters and with white gutters. They are standing and in a while they'll be walking. After they go to the gymnastic place they will go home. They will lock the gymnastic place and un-

lock their house door. Then, they will take the dog in and wipe off its feet because it's all dirty and muddy.

Thank you for reading my story.

Notice how skillfully Brenda uses the painting as a departure point. Starting from this single, static moment, she develops an entire plot, rich with small, significant detail.

"The Boaters " is characteristic of Edouard Manet's work, which shocked the academic painters popular at his time, because of his subject matter. Manet demonstrated a healthy interest in everyday life. He was scorned because he used ideas from the real world, depicted in brilliant colors. In reacting to the painting, Dan dictated this description:

> Two people are on the boat. The boat is white with some brown on the top of it. There is another boat behind it. The boat has two flags on it. One person has a flower. They're sitting on the edge of the boat. There are some houses behind the boats. Both the man and the woman have a hat on. The man has a striped shirt on. The woman has a striped dress on, with a black hat that has some cotton on it. The man has a hat with a red stripe on it.
>
> There are ropes to pull in the sails. There are two fishing poles on one side. The raft is about where the lake starts. And there is a little tug boat behind the other boat. There are some trees on the other side of the raft.

Georges Seurat's "A Sunday Afternoon on the Grande Jatte," is readily available in reproduction form. Born in 1859, Seurat carried the work of the earlier Impressionist painters to its final conclusion. While they were interested in breaking-up surfaces by light, Seurat completely dissolved form by representing it with tiny round dots of color of equal size. The technique was as severely disciplined and painstaking as its predecessor Impressionism was spontaneous.

Kari chose to dictate a composition about this painting, but she did not create a plot extending backward or forward in time. Rather, she did a careful enumeration of objects she saw, a valid type of non-fiction writing.

In the old days at the park, there is a monkey chasing a dog. There is also some ladies that have umbrellas over them to keep the sun out of their eyes. There is some boats in the pond by the park. There is lots of dogs. There is a water fountain. A girl has some flowers in her hand that she picked. There is a long boat with five people in it. There is a man with a long pipe. Next to the man with the long pipe, there is a man with a cane. There is some tall grass near the edge of the water. Some people are laying down in the sun. There is a steamboat with some steam coming out of it. There is a building across the lake. It is grey and made out of bricks. There is a sailboat with two sails and one flag. There is a girl skipping around with white hair and a red dress. In the park there is some grass that is brown. And there are some red and white flowers in the grass. There is a lady fishing. And the lady that is fishing has a hat on with pink flowers on it.

Far less representational is "I and the Village," by the Russian surrealist Marc Chagall. Born in 1887, this painter evoked the magic of the subconscious and the dream world by combining fragments of reality in seemingly unrelated ways.

About this painting, Matt told the following story:

I see a girl milking a cow. There is a big picture of a goat and there's a man who came out a window. A girl is standing upside down and a man is walking towards the girl with a saw. A man with a hat is looking at the goat. There is a ball on the ground and a necklace on a man. There are flowers. There is one upside down, so maybe they go with the upside down girl. There are clouds in the sky and a cross on a house. There are stars in the sky. The goat was injured a little. Maybe he was rolling around and he rolled into a piece of glass. There are whiskers on the goat's chin. I think the goat is wearing a necklace, or something. It looks like the man is giving the goat roses. A man has a ring on his finger. There is a shadow of the goat's ear and it looks like there's going to be a storm or a wave. On the man's head he has designs. The goat has a nose, of course. There are houses in back of other houses and it looks like the goat is wearing a cross. Another man has a hat on. The big people are going to get married and I think the man is going to pay the lady to do handstands.

The American Robert Henri painted "Skipper Mick." Born in 1865, Henri was a rebel against the heavily "Europeanized" studio art of his time. His paintings are characterized by strong contrasts in brushwork which create vigorous differences in color intensity. About "Skipper Mick," Susie dictated this story:

My brother's name is Mike. He is three years old. He fights with me. We sometimes tell stories to each other. Sometimes I take him for a walk. When he takes his nap, he is very quiet and I like that. Sometimes I take him to my Grandma's and then I bring him home. I take him on my bike.

A painting called "Umbrellas in the Rain," was done by Maurice Prendergast, a contemporary of Robert Henri. Though the two artists worked at the same time, this painting makes apparent why Prendergast is considered a lumninist, an artist especially concerned with the effects of light on color. About this painting, Kristine composed the following story:

> It was a rainy day out and a lot of people were waiting at the palace. Almost all the people had umbrellas. There were ladies and men. There were also a lot of puddles. Some ladies were in their best dresses and holding them up so they wouldn't fall in the puddles. Some people who had hats on didn't have umbrellas because their hats had a big rim on them and since they didn't have dresses on they had to tuck their pants into their boots. It seems like there's mostly ladies because there is a ball. And there are guards for the ball and it seems like the ball just opened.

Another watercolor painting is "The City," by Dong Kingman, a Japanese-American artist. A contemporary painter, Kingman creates a visual intensity in his work through the juxtaposition of many small areas of highly saturated color. Greg's story is a thorough descriptive enumeration of what he saw:

> Two men are riding in a car to a store. One man is buying a paper from another man for about 50¢. There is this man looking in a window and he sees some tools. The man in the store is reading a piece of paper called "Variety." There are lots of buildings in this big city: Studio 57, Joe's Pizza, a coffee shop right next to the big store, hot drinks and Coca Cola is right next to Studio 57. There are lots of people walking down the street on the sidewalk, looking for some more stores to buy groceries in. There is a tall building which has a red cat in a window, looking out on the busy streets. Another man is reading a piece of paper by the paperstand. There's lots of lights on the busy street: two are red. 3 lights are over the street to make it more clear. There is one light on the big store that is yellow and means slow down for the cars. There sure are lots of signs on the street, like for buses. There is one sign that is a hand that says, "Go right!" There's a green moon that says, "Three degrees below zero." There's a store called "Dad's Rootbeer." There's a sign with Chinese letters. There's a big sale at the big store. Shirts for $10, socks for $2.36, some pants for $5 each. And if you buy any toys, they are $2 each.

Edgar Degas painted "In Front of the Tribune." Born in 1834, Degas, a leader of the Impressionists, was himself strongly influenced by Japanese prints, newly imported into Paris. Degas' art is characterized by patterns caught in some casual moment, apparent in this painting of horses, a recurring subject. About this, second grader Sarah wrote:

> There are seven people in the picture. It looks as if they are getting ready for a horse race. I can see people getting ready to watch the race. They look like they are rich. The grass is partly green and partly brown. All the horses are chestnut brown. There is a brown building in the background. There are also some green trees in the background. There are some tan jockey suits, some red suits, some green suits, and a purple suit.

A painting titled "Goldfish," is by the French painter Henri Matisse. Born in 1869, Matisse traveled widely, gaining an understanding of the use of color in Eastern art, and medieval glass. His work is characterized by a surface enrichment, with calligraphic line enhancing areas of flat color. About his "Goldfish," Theresa, wrote the following:

> Once upon a time there was a glass of water. And inside that glass of water lived four goldfish. Under the glass was a plate with plants on it. Under the plate was a table. Around the table were pink, red, and green flowers. There were plants all around too.
>
> The goldfish said, "I wonder when Sarah's going to feed us? I hope she feeds us soon because I feel sick." She felt sick not because she was hungry. It was because she was going to have a baby. She had a baby. She felt much better then. Now there were five little goldfish all in a jar.

We found that children enjoyed composing about a painting entitled "Fishing Boats on the Beach." By the Dutch artist, Vincent Van Gogh, this vibrates with texture. An impulsive use of the paint characterized the work of Van Gogh, who lived most of his life in the tranquil warmth and peace of Provence in France. About this pastorale scene, typical of the area, second grader Maceo wrote:

> This boat was at the shore. The other boats were in the water. The water was so rough that one boat was sunk. The four boats were on the shore. The other boat sank for ever and ever with men on it. And they died. The shore was dry for two hundred years. When the men were found, a graveyard was made.

"The Country School" is by the American genre painter, Winslow Homer, who found inspiration in the everyday scene. Born in 1836, Homer worked while young as a magazine illustrator, and this affected the strongly realistic character of his later work. About this painting second grader Lori wrote:

Once upon a time there was a little school house. There were only 12 kids not including the teacher. I think that it is reading time because everybody is reading. I bet they have a super time at recess time because it's so beautiful. I think a little boy is crying because he can't pronounce a word. The teacher saw someone doing something wrong and is giving him a hard stare. Someone brought the teacher flowers today. Perhaps it was her secret admirer.

COMPOSITION FROM FILMS

A more difficult task is writing a story line from a film. The structure is again provided by the sequence of visual images, which cannot be varied. What makes the task more difficult than writing about a wordless book is the transitory nature of the images. Because of this, such film dictation should be delayed until after children have had several opportunities to write about still pictures.

To motivate first graders to write story lines about a film, we used an animated version of the Hans Christian Anderson story, "Thumbelina."[1] The teacher showed the film to her children, telling them before viewing that later they would retell the story in their own words. Then the film was shown, with the sound turned off. This was to ensure that students would focus on the task, which was encoding in their own words the visual images they took in through their eyes. Children then talked about the action of the film, and then they viewed it a second time to make sure they understood the action. Following this, Aamir dictated this story:

Once upon a time there was a girl named Thumbelina. First she put her feet in the water. Then this frog came. He was trying to eat her. Thumbelina ran. She jumped in a clam. Then the frog got the clam. He went under the sea. Thumbelina got out of the calm, and then she called someone. It was a fish. She said, "You push me," and the fish said, "Yes." Thumbelina said, "Thank you." She was far away, and then the frog came. He was wondering where she was. Thumbelina was floating. A bee picked her up. The other bees were laughing at her. The bee was mad. He said, "Stop that," and the bees laughed. So the other bee pushed her off the leaf.

1. Coronet Films, 11m., color. Available from B.A.V.I. (Bureau of Audio-Visual Instruction, 1327 University Avenue, P.O. Box 2093, Madison, WI. 53701.

Thumbelina landed on a spider web. She thought it was a swing. The spider saw it, and he cut the spider web. Thumbelina landed on a flower that had some white things that were flying. Then she caught one and she was flying. She dropped it, and landed in a flower. The flower closed. Thumbelina was safe, but then there was a big wind. The leaves were flying off, and Thumbelina fell down.

She went near to this cave, and she was knocking on this other flower to open, but it wouldn't open. This mother beaver took Thumbelina in her cave, and showed her around. And then she showed her to a bird. Thumbelina wanted to go to the bird, but the mother beaver said, "Don't care about him." Then they went downstairs.

Thumbelina and mother beaver were cleaning up, and mother beaver fell asleep. Thumbelina went upstairs. She was looking at the bird and petting him. Father beaver came and wanted some tea. He said, "Where's my tea?" Mother beaver said, "Thumbelina, come here," She came downstairs. She was frightened of the father beaver, so she went upstairs to the bird. Then father beaver came, and he was going to get Thumbelina, so the bird flew away with Thumbelina.

Notice that the story Aamir composed is coherent, able to stand independently from the film which inspired it.

In the following retelling by Rachel, some of the details are different. Nonetheless, the sequence established by the film enables her to recreate the story accurately and yet with imagination.

The bird was singing, "Tweet, tweet." The little girl was in a flower, and then a bee came to knock at the flower. Then the girl opened the flower, but the bee did not like her. Then the bee went away.

Thumbelina went to a pond. She went splash with her legs. A green frog came out of the pond and he wanted to eat her. She ran away but the frog got her. She was hiding in a nut shell. The frog took the nut shell with her in it. He put it on a green leaf. She wanted to get off the green leaf.

A fish came and blew her back to the dry land. Then a bug took her. But the bugs did not like her very much. The king or queen, whichever (I don't know) threw her down on the spider web, and then she got into big trouble.

She went to a mouse hole. She rang the bell. The mother mouse took her into her house. She went to sleep. The next morning, the mother said, "Clean up this room." She looked at mother mouse and said, "Is that it?" "Yes, go on." The mother was doing a little dress for her. The mother was real tired. The mother opened her eyes and then closed her eyes. She went to sleep.

The little girl saw her sleeping. She went upstairs. That was the sleeping bird. The mother said, "That's nothing - just a bird that always sleeps." But it wasn't, and when the mother got to sleep, the girl went upstairs to the bird. She petted the bird.

When the father got home she came down, because she was scared of him. She ran upstairs. The mother and father ran after her. The girl was under the bird's wing, and then the bird flew back out. The bird let her out on a flower, and the little girl took the flower with two hands. She flew back to her own flower. The bird was on her tree, and she was singing "Tweet, tweet" again.

In the preceeding examples the details are different. Each child was able to flesh out the plot skeleton with imaginative language different than that of other children. Yet the organizing framework gave structure to what was dictated, so that the result is a coherent story which makes sense out of context. The stories would make more sense if we read them while also viewing the film, but they are independent enough to stand alone as literary retellings.

VARIATIONS

A more sophisticated skill is comparing variant editions of the same story.[1] Cinderella, Snow White, and Rumplestiltskin are among many stories for which different editions are available. These may vary in the language and plot structure, or they may vary in the accompanying illustrations. It is easy to locate a pair of books, share them with children, and encourage boys and girls to point out likenesses and differences.

In one first grade class the teacher used two variants of an old tale. The Five Chinese Brothers with illustrations by Kurt Weise is well-known.[2] Less familiar is the Six Chinese Brothers, illustrated with scissors cuts.[3] The teacher read the Weise book one day, and encouraged students to react to it. On the following day she read the version by Hou-tien, and again the class discussed the book. Then they drew up a list of comparisons:

1. "Book Illustration: Key to Visual and Verbal Literacy," by John Warren Stewig, in Using Literature in the Elementary School, ed. by Stewig and Sebesta. Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1978, pp. 35-50.

2. Bishop, Claire Huchet. Five Chinese Brothers. New York: Coward, McCann, 1938.

3. Hou-tien, Cheng. Six Chinese Brothers. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979.

The books are the same

both were about brothers
both were Chinese
both had talents
both begged to say good-bye
both lived in villages
in both, someone tried to kill the sons
no names in either story
both tried to chop off the heads
both had stretching legs
both tried to drown a brother

The books are different

One story has five; the other six brothers
brothers had different powers in each story
one had a mother, the other had a father
one used the word "promptly" and the other didn't
in one the man was sick; the other a boy was drowned
one had skin so hard steel bounced off and the other had an iron neck
their clothes were different
they had different ways of asking to go home to say "good-bye"
there was no arm stretching in the first story
One didn't have a person who could hold his breath "indefinitely"

The list represents impressive observation skills on the part of these children, who had never before participated in such a comparing/contrasting experience. Activities in observing similarities and differences lays needed groundwork for high level thinking and responding skills.

MAKING CHOICES:

The last of the compostion skills is making preference statements. This involves going beyond simply noting likenesses and differences, to a more sophisticated expression of a reason for liking one or the other of the two books or films. First grade children, after seeing both of these books, dictated a reason for choosing one or the other. Among those who chose:

The Five Chinese Brothers were:

> I liked them both because they both had happy endings and they never could get rid of all those brothers. I like Chinese stories, and I know about other countries.
>
> by Ira

I liked the Five Chinese Brothers because there was more action. The boy drowned. One brother was thrown in the water. One brother couldn't be burned. The pictures were more colorful.

by Slaven

Others chose the Six Chinese Brothers:

I liked the Six Chinese Brothers because I am six years old. The story was exciting because the one who could stretch his leg found jewels, and the story had a pearl.

by Marko

I liked the Six Chinese Brothers because the pictures were little people and they stole a pearl from the king and boiled it. The father got better. This book had my favorite colors, red and white.

by Joyha

Second graders who also looked at both books were asked to write down their choices. Among responses to The Five Chinese Brothers were:

I liked The Five Chinese Brothers because it had funny pictures. . . . like when the third Chinese brother got thrown off the boat and the powers were gooder because the legs could stretch farther. I like the boats better because the boats were not fancy.

by Ian

I liked The Five Chinese Brothers because the pictures were more realistic and the Brothers were big. I do not like little people. And the book was more exciting because the King is more mean. The King in The Five Chinese Brothers put the boy in whipped cream and the King in the Six Chinese Brothers threw him in the water, and I liked whipped cream better.

by Bill

Among responses to the Six Chinese Brothers were:

My favorite book was The Six Chinese Brothers because I liked the pictures. It was exciting and thrilling. It was sad and happy. I liked it because they are smaller and I liked small people. I was sad because the King wanted to kill the first brother. I like the pictures because I like red better than yellow. It was exciting because when the doctors said, "You will have to get the King's pearl and boil it in water." That was exciting because I've never heard of that cure.

by Lori

I like The Six Chinese Brothers more because the people are funny and little. The pictures were nice in both books, but the Six Chinese Brothers was more interesting. The Brothers were little. I liked colors better because I like red, black, and white.

The pictures are beautiful because they weren't plain like the other book. They both were dressed good. The words were spelled good. I liked both boys that could stretch their legs. And the one that could stretch his arms because they were funny. And the gold pieces. The gold pieces were very shiny and pretty. I liked the King because he had gold pieces and I like gold pieces. And both of the stories had a happy ending.

by Amy

Children can also express preferences about films. Many traditional tales are available in more than one version. By careful advance scheduling, teachers can secure a pair of films in contrasting style to show, so children can choose their favorite and write a reason.

A teacher of third grade students recently used two versions of "Thumbelina." One was the four color, animated version mentioned earlier. The second was a black and white version done with silhouettes cut by Lotte Reiniger.[1] After seeing each film, chidren were asked to write which they liked best.

Among those who chose the four color version were these:

I like the cartoon best because it was colorful. It had the same ideas as the silhouette. It was good because they didn't show the ending, because they wanted it to be a surprize.

by Katie

I liked the cartoon version much more than the silhouette version, because the cartoon had a lot more colors. The silhouette was just plain black and white. All my life I liked cartoons more than silhouettes.

by David

I liked the cartoon best because she can move all her parts. She got taken by a frog, and a beatle, and I like that.

By Mitch

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1. Contemporary Films, 10m., b/w. Available from B.A.V.I.

Some of the responses from those children choosing the silhouette version included:

> I liked the silhouette because it was more exciting than the cartoon. I really admired the work on the silhouette, because I think it would be hard to move paper that way.
>
> by Sam

> I liked the silhouette better because it was pretty hard to make that black and white. Also because there wasn't any noise except the author's voice. In both stories there were likenesses and differences. Anyway, the silhouette was longer.
>
> by Randy

> I liked the black and white because of the good work they put in to it. I also like it because they put the ending in it.
>
> by Connie

It was interesting to see which film the children chose. Of the 32 students involved, seventeen prefered the four color, animated version, while 15 prefered the black/white silhouette film. This was a more even distribution of choice than the teacher and I had anticipated. Given the pervasive four color nature of television, we had anticipated that few children would choose the black and white film, but this was not the case.

As a result of this experiment using visuals as a stimulus to composition, we concluded that children can indeed perform the rather sophisticated task of looking at two films and articulating a preference. Although these primary age children had never before done this, their writings were coherent, conscientious responses to the task. Their writing should become even more fluent composition as they have other opportunities to respond to film.

Visuals can be an effective stimulus to composition. Children can indeed write fluently about:

1. wordless picture books,
2. artist's paintings,
3. story lines in films,
4. variants in the same story, and
5. their preferences.

These children responded enthusiastically to the five writing experiences, and the ideas can work equally well with your students. Will you give children an opportunity to try?